House GOP Tries to Curb Domestic Violence Programs

By Kenneth J. Cooper
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House Republicans have moved to scale back the planned expansion of programs designed to combat domestic violence, prompting protests from female lawmakers, Clinton administration officials and Senate Judiciary Chairman Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah).

The domestic violence programs attracted broad bipartisan backing when they were authorized last year as part of an otherwise disputed anti-crime bill. The House initially approved the Violence Against Women Act in 1993 as free-standing legislation, 421 to 0. Supporters range from conservative Republicans like Hatch to liberal Democrats like Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.).

In the last three weeks, two House Appropriations subcommittees have approved spending bills for next year that omit two-thirds of the funding authorized for battered women's shelters, rape prevention, child abuse prosecution and other domestic violence programs. The subcommittees approved a combined $74.9 million of the $237.3 million authorized for such programs under the omnibus crime bill.

It is common for annual appropriations to fall far below the level of authorized spending, but a trust fund was supposed to finance the crime legislation from the savings achieved by eliminating 272,000 federal jobs. During last year's negotiations on the crime legislation, Rep. John R. Kasich (R-Ohio), now House Budget Committee chairman, also insisted that spending the bill authorized not exceed the amount available in the anti-crime trust fund.

"To see the slashing of those funds really violates all the promises we heard," said Rep. Nita M. Lowey (D-N.Y.), chairwoman of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues in the House. "Without the funding, the Violence Against Women Act is meaningless."

When the Appropriations Committee meets this week to consider annual spending bills, Lowey, a committee member, said she would offer amendments to permit full funding of the domestic violence programs.

House Appropriations Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) and the two subcommittee chairmen defended the curtailment of domestic violence programs as a necessary part of budget cutting.

"During this time of fiscal belt tightening, we have worked extremely hard to protect funding for violence against women programs and programs that combat crime in general," Livingston said.

Rep. John Edward Porter (R-Ill.), chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health and human services, said most of the panel's members considered the domestic violence programs "duplicative of programs in other places."

Porter's subcommittee last week approved $400,000 to continue a national domestic violence hotline, far below the $61.9 million authorized for domestic violence programs in its jurisdiction. Livingston released a statement noting that the subcommittee approved, based on separate legislative authority, $32 million for battered women's shelters and $7 million for rape prevention.

Hatch and Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.), ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, wrote Livingston last week and urged him to support full funding for Violence Against Women Act programs under the labor, health and human services spending bill. Otherwise, the senators estimated, accomodations for 60,000 battered women in shelters would not become available.

"In a country where battered women's shelters typically must turn away several women for each one they accept, there should be no doubt that this funding is absolutely essential," Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala said.

The Appropriations subcommittee on commerce, justice, state and judiciary approved $74.5 million out of the $175.4 million authorized for domestic violence programs. This year, $25 million was appropriated for programs under the subcommittee jurisdiction.

"We tripled the funding from the current year," said Rep. Harold Rogers (R-Ky.), the subcommittee's chairman. "We couldn't fund as much as was authorized. We didn't have the money . . . I don't know of any other item in our bill that we increased that dramatically. Frankly, I think that will be enough for this year because you can staff up (only) so quick."

Biden, disputing Rogers' assertion, noted that the anti-crime trust fund made financing available for the programs. "It's not like the money's not there. They're going to spend it on something else or to reduce the debt," he charged.

Livingston said $1.9 billion in proposed block grants for crime fighting would allow localities to fund domestic violence programs. Clinton has opposed the block grants because they would wipe out the crime bill's grants to hire 100,000 additional police officers.

Attorney General Janet Reno predicted the proposed House funding levels would mean "fewer shelters, fewer police and fewer prosecutors working to protect women from domestic violence and sexual assaults."

Elizabeth Morra, a spokeswoman for the House Appropriations Committee, said $400 million from the trust fund was currently slated to go unexpended and blamed the budget resolution that the House Budget Committee negotiated with the Senate.

"We spent as much money out of that crime trust fund as the budget resolution allowed us to," she said. But Morra acknowledged that the Appropriations Committee could adjust its funding allocations to make up the shortfall, as Lowey plans to propose.